Start of [Memoranda about Dr. h.c Martin Riesenburger].

AR 11776

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MEMORANDA ABOUT Dr.h.c. MARTIN RIESENBURGER

Dr.h.c. Martin Riesenburger
(5/14/1896-4/14/1966, Berlin, DDR)

Originally he was a Prediger (Preacher) of the Jewish Community in Berlin. Since he was married to a Christian woman (Frau Natalie Riesenburger), who nobly and courageously refused to divorce him, he was allowed by the Nazis to continue to hold humble religious services on the Jewish Cemetery in Berlin-Weissensee (and in the Cemetery's chapel), and to minister to the religious needs at the numerous Jewish funerals (many after suicide), all the way till 1945. His basic Jewish religious services were the only ones still permitted by the Germans within their sphere in Europe.

After the Liberation in 1945, he resumed his role as a "Preacher". After the politically necessitated break between the two Jewish Communities of the East and the West in 1953, Riesenburger, then the only Jewish clergyman in Berlin(East), was made the Rabbi of the small Jewish Community in Berlin(East), and finally Landesrabbiner of the DDR (Grand Rabbi of the German Democratic Republic), both appointments made by the Communist Government of the DDR, which also conferred on him the honorary doctor's degree. In the years 1945-1950 I met him a few times.

Martin Riesenburger was a humble man, of deep thought, not given to small talk. On the outside he was very reserved and appeared almost gruff. By necessity, living under the Communist dictatorship, he had to remain neutral, and even keep silent, on political matters.

He certainly was aware of the fate, which in 1947 had befallen Erich Nelhans and Fritz Katten, the President and his deputy of the still united Jewish Community in Berlin. One day they were arrested by the GPU in their offices on Oranienburger Strasse in the Soviet Sector, and were never heard from again. No trial was ever held and their families were never informed. Rumors had it, that Nelhans and Katten had helped two or three Jewish Soviet officers to escape to the American DP-Camp in Berlin-Schlachtensee. As Jews, so recently liberated from Hitler's terror, they believed (erroneously, as it turned out), that the Soviets would respect them as Jews and they falsely relied on Soviet magnanimity and sense of justice.

But Riesenburger never became a Communist - as an observant Jew, he could not possibly become one. One excludes the other. Heinz Galinski, the Jewish politician, who was elected President of the Jewish Community in Berlin (West) after the split in 1953, and who remained its President up to his death in 1992, never came to defend the character of Martin Riesenburger, not even, when one spoke to him privately. Thus he contributed to the Western-held suspicion, that Riesenburger had turned Communist.

In New York, I once heard an opinion in which Riesenburger was portrayed as a Communist sympathizer. "If it had been otherwise," it was stated, "he would have left the Soviet Sector and settled in the West." Naturally, few people nowadays realize, what limited possibil-

ities of emigration Jews in Riesenburger's situation had in those years (from 1945 till 1961, when the Berlin Wall was erected, and even a move to Berlin[West] became impossible). Before 1961 these were:

1. Emigration to Israel, which the Soviets quietly permitted between 1948 and approx. 1951, when they finally realized that Israel would never become affiliated with the Communist camp. They then made immigration from their sphere to Israel impossible.

2. Leaving all possessions and all friends and family behind, fleeing secretly from Berlin(East) to Berlin(West). From there they could go to:

    a. Western Germany, where the Nazis maintained their hold on public opinion with the tacit approval of the Western Allies - not very enticing for a Jew.

    b. Israel. The Israeli "Law of Return" welcomes every Jew in the World to come to Israel. But you had, and still have, to be a Zionist, to take such a step. Not every Jew is also a Zionist.

No other country, like Great Britain or France, took in Jews from the Soviet sphere in Germany. And there was no opportunity to emigrate to the United States. Jews from the Soviet Sector or the Soviet Zone were never allowed entry into the United States of America. Jews from Berlin's U.S.Sector were admitted beginning in 1946, from the British Sector in 1947 and from the French Sector in 1948. But for Jews from the Soviet Sector and the Soviet Zone the hour for admittance to the freedom of the United States of America never came. Although the vast majority of them would have very much liked to emigrate to the U.S., the American Authorities never gave them permission to do so.

Presumably, the official justification for this denial of entry was, that one had to protect the United States from Communist infiltration. The American authorities in Berlin (CIC) always checked the personal and political background of every prospective Jewish immigrant very thoroughly. The American concern was that these Jews could have been infested by Communist thought.

But throughout all these years, the Government of the United States was rather generous in the granting of immigration permits for former Nazis from Germany and from other, mostly Eastern European countries.

Still, some people continue to criticize Martin Riesenburger for his refusal to leave his little community of mostly aged and invalid Jewish people in Berlin[East].

Personally I would like to add that it was Martin Riesenburger (then still just a "Prediger"), who performed the marriage of my sister Gudrun Moser and her husband Erwin Dittrich at the Synagogue Fränkel Ufer (U.S.Sector) in Berlin in August, 1947.

One other personal note: In 1952, a friend of mine went to Weissensee, on my behalf, to see Prediger Martin Riesenburger, to get his required

approval for the proposed inscription on the modest grave stone which was to be erected on the grave of my Father Dr.Ernst Moser (d.1951). This was at a time when, still living in Berlin(West), I did not enter the Soviet Sector or the Soviet Zone anymore, because I was afraid for my safety there. Martin Riesenburger, without being told (and not asking for) the reasons for my not wanting to come to Weissensee myself, understood the circumstances and cooperated fully and with tact. The stone then could be set.

A man of character like Martin Riesenburger should not be forgotten.

Roland H. Merton

See also:
"Und das Licht verlöschte nicht"
Ed.Hentrich.

End of [Memoranda about Dr. h.c Martin Riesenburger].